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The Fourth Church Pulpit

SOMETHING OLD -- SOMETHING NEW

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture : Jeremiah 32:1-15 Revelation 21:1-5

". . . See, I am making all things new."
Revelation 21:5 (NRSV)

> "Whether the expenditure which has been made here . . . shall prove justified, time alone can answer. And the answer will be in terms of service, the lives lived here, and the spirit that shall go out from here and enter into the life of the community. . . and yet there is within us a deep hope that these structures, these walls, may have a silent ministration of their own . . . We trust that not only members but passersby may be moved to enter and . . . find . . . an awakened sense of reverence of the presence and power of the Unseen."
> [Thomas D. Jones, Chairman of the Building Committee, The Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, on the dedication of the facility, May 12, 1914.]

We never met, Mr. Thomas D. Jones, but 79 years ago last Wednesday evening you said some words that I have been thinking about a lot this week. Actually, there may still be a few people around here who remember that night and remember you. Two days before, Sunday, May 10, 1914, the people of the Fourth Presbyterian Church walked through the doors of their new building for the first time and looked up in wonder and gratitude at the soaring, beautiful space you and your building committee dreamed about and planned and built.

On the evening of May 14, at the service of dedication, you must have been standing right there, at the lectern, with your friend and pastor, John Timothy Stone, sitting behind you when, like the good prudent Presbyterian you were, you expressed your concerns about the project; in fact, you expressed your concerns about what we call the "bottom line," and about which Presbyterians still worry a lot, let me assure you. What you worried out loud about was this:

> "Whether this expenditure which has been made here . . . shall prove justified." You said "time alone would answer." You said "the answer will be in terms of service, the lives lived here, and the spirit that shall go out from here and enter into the life of the community."

My sense is that you are listening this morning, Mr. Jones, and so I thought we might have a go at a little accounting — after these 79 years.

But first, let me assure you that I, and your counterparts, Mr. Johnson, Mr. Peck, Ms. Boneham, Mr. Gignilliat, Ms. Maddox, Mr. Douglass, and a host of others are most grateful to you because we know why you were worried. You and your colleagues bought a piece of property on the northern extension of Pine Street. It was called Lincoln Parkway at Delaware Place — and not everybody was for that decision. I expect you were criticized a lot downtown. After all, it wasn't even a street: it was a sandy road along the lakefront. There wouldn't be paving nor a bridge over the river on the street for several more years. Furthermore, on the lot itself stood the ruins of an old tile manufacturing plant and where the manse is, there was a lively tavern, M. Donoghue's North Shore Sample Room.

In any event not everybody agreed that there needed to be a church way out here, so far away from activity of the city. The old church seemed adequate. And not everybody was pleased with the scope and ambition of your plans. There wasn't a distinguished building anywhere around; just a collection of falling down rooming houses, so we appreciate the courage — which must have seemed like foolishness — when you hired the best architects in the country and set out to build the grandest church west of New York. No wonder you worried out loud on May 12!

Well, Mr. Jones, here we are again, 79 years later, and what we have in mind is to restore this worship space and we think you're going to love it. The stone will look like it did originally: light, alive. And the ceiling; the years have not been kind to those gorgeous paintings — so we're going to clean and restore them, every single one of them. And, since we do know a few things about light that you couldn't have known, we're going to make it possible both to see the ceiling and our Bibles and hymnbooks which, for some of us at least, is becoming a little difficult.

And taking a leaf from your notebook — you built facilities to serve this neighborhood — we're going to reorganize the place, recreate it actually, because the needs of the neighborhood are different now; still urgent and still the focus of our attention, but different. Today, 79 years and four days after you worried out loud whether the expenditure was worth it, we are sure it was, Mr. Jones; so sure that we're about to take a plunge that would have boggled your mind. We're going to set out to raise more than twelve times the amount of money you raised to build the place.

We think you'd like the fact that we're going to give a million dollars of it away — to the mission of the Presbyterian Church at home and abroad. Your friend, Dr. Stone, is smiling about that, I know. And we're going to designate one-fourth of that to the First Presbyterian Church of Chicago, which you recall is the parent congregation of this one; but which now lives in a situation you might not understand, on the corner of Kimbark and 64th in Woodlawn which in your day was a very lovely neighborhood but which isn't so nice now. Well, their sanctuary needs help too; more than this one. So we're going to see that it gets freshened up and restored.

We're going to do all this the same way you did, by the way, by asking our members to contribute their money. In fact we've already tested the waters with some of our members and our officers; that reminds me of an incident that I think you'll enjoy and which gives me an opportunity to tell you about what kind of church we have become. And that, of course, is what your question is really about, isn't it?

In any case, a group of us were in Greece recently and on our first morning we were met in our Athens hotel by Susan Volkoboer. What a nice surprise. Susan is a Deacon at Fourth Church. She is a speech pathologist; six months ago she took a leave of absence from her job here in Chicago and moved to Yas, Romania to work in an orphanage as a volunteer. It's the kind of thing that happens a lot around here. Well, Susan was homesick for Chicago and her friends at church so when she heard about a group of us coming to Greece, she took a week's vacation and flew to Athens to see us; so that's why I was walking up the hill to the Acropolis with her, and as we passed the Parthenon, looking at the scaffolding, Susan said, "And you think you have a restoration project on your hands!" And then, laughing, she told me how important it was to get letters from home and how very much she was anticipating hearing from her Church and how no mail was getting through to Yas, Romania until finally, a single letter arrived from Fourth Church; and eagerly opening it, she read the officers' capital fund solicitation letter. "Dear Susan, send money." She laughed, fortunately, but it does show you that we intend to ask every member to help, and even Eastern Romania won't put you outside that loop, as we like to say.

I'm not sure how it was in 1914, Mr. Jones, but our members today are asked to give a lot. Everybody is raising money: symphony orchestras, museums, zoos. There is not a college in the land that is not in a capital campaign or about to launch one. They're asked to give money every day. And we ask them a lot too . . . all year long. So we are humbled by their generosity and we know that all of them — all of us — will have to make significant sacrifices to accomplish what we have set out to do.

It's a very different world, Mr. Jones, in many ways, but the one that concerns us most is the different role religion, particularly our brand, plays in the larger scheme of things. You expected that the war which was on our horizon in 1914 would make the world safe for democracy, and we have had to adjust to the fact that it didn't really do that. And, you expected that we were on our way to becoming a Christian nation, with Christian values built into law and popular custom. Well, it's pretty confusing to say the least. We have become, in some ways, a lot more secular than you could imagine and a lot more pluralistic.

Can you imagine that there are more Moslems in the United States than Episcopalians? What the academicians are saying is that the "Christian paradigm" is dead, and the best illustration of what that means is a little story William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas tell in their book, *Resident Aliens,* which is what they call Christians in this culture.

Willimon describes growing up in your world when on Sunday morning the church was the only show in town, and all the stores were closed, and you couldn't even buy a gallon of gas. And then the paradigm began to die.

> "One is tempted to date the shift sometime on a Sunday evening in 1963. Then, in Greenville, South Carolina, in defiance of the state's time-honored blue laws, the Fox Theater opened on Sunday. Seven of us — regular attendees of the Methodist Youth Fellowship — made a pact to enter the front door of the church, be seen, then quietly slip out the back and join John Wayne at the Fox.
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> "On that night, Greenville, South Carolina, the last pocket of resistance to secularity in the Western world — served notice that it would no longer be a prop for the church. The Fox Theater went head to head with the church over who would provide the world view for the young. That night in 1963, the Fox Theater won the opening skir- mish." [*Resident Aliens,* p. 16, Willimon and Hauerwas]

We're pretty much used to it now, Mr. Jones, but we're a long way from being the only show in town - even on Sunday, what with Water Tower Place and Bloomies. That's another story, but it does remind me that when you dedicated the building in 1914 the steeple dominated the neighborhood, a little like all those cathedrals in the Middle Ages in Europe which is, of course, what you and the architect had in mind. I call it the "ecclesiastical inversion principle" because it's exactly upside down now. A paradigm which stood as a stable reality for a thousand years just turned over — a moment ago. All of a sudden we're the smallest building. Our steeple barely reaches to the level of the cocktail lounge in the hotel north of us. And the only way to really see all of your building is to take an elevator to the 96th story of the Hancock Building, go to the observation deck and look straight down — about 1,000 feet — and there is your/our church; not a towering, dominating, imperial edifice, but a tiny, precious, intricate jewel, with its spot of green and tiny flash of fountain.

So things are very different for us, Mr. Jones. And just at the critical moment when sociological change threatens to overwhelm us, something peculiar is happening to all the old churches, nationally: the Methodists and Congregationalists and Episcopalians and Presbyterians. Every single one of us is in a crisis, nationally. And we're being forced, every one of us, to rethink what it means to be a national church. The truth is, Mr. Jones, unlike your day, not very many people come here because we're Presbyterian. In fact, what we are denominationally seems to be about ninth on the list of reasons people come here. You'd be surprised and pleased at how many Roman Catholics attend here and join here — or divide their time comfortably between here and Holy Name Cathedral.

One of our experts, Loren Meade, has written an important book, *The Once & Future Church,* which argues that there is a very radical shift occurring in the way American Christians think about religion, full of hope and also danger. The danger he thinks is that if we spend too much of our energy propping up old structures, we won't have any left for what God is creating anew in the church and the world.

And he's not alone. A distinguished sociologist at Princeton University, Robert Wuthnow, studies churches like ours and says that the whole survival of Christianity, as an identity and value system and a source of meaning, depends not on denominational headquarters in New York or Louisville, but on congregations like this one. Meade and Wuthnow are saying that we are where the action is, that the front line - not only of worship, preaching and education, but of Christian mission - is the front door of the local church.

So, we think what we are about here and what transpires in the thousands of congregations across the land, is very important. We are where Christianity lives: where the Gospel touches lives; where lives are challenged, comforted, supported, affirmed, consoled, healed and changed — the local church.

Robert Wuthnow said that it is part of the mission of a local congregation to look backward, not to preserve the structures of the past but to remember who we are and what we are about because that is the very best way to get ready for the future.

I don't know if you ever heard the story, Mr. Jones. My guess is you did; but thinking about you this week and what we are about to do, and looking back — a long way — all the way to the 6th century B.C., I thought about the story of Jeremiah and the Real Estate Deal. The date is the 6th century B.C. and times are very tough. The Babylonians are at the gate of Jerusalem. The King has made a bad mistake — calling in the Egyptians for help. Jeremiah called it, preached against it, questioned the King's intelligence and predicted utter disaster. For his prophetic courage he is put in jail. The Babylonians brush aside the Egyptian Army and now, really angry, turn their full attention to the siege of Jerusalem. The end is near and it's going to be terrible. There will not be one stone of Jerusalem standing on top of another. And at that very moment — when there is no future at all - Jeremiah does a Real Estate Deal. It's an incredible story: He's in jail. The barbarian is at the gate. And at that moment his cousin shows up and tells him his uncle's field is for sale, and Jeremiah gets money out of the bank, hires a lawyer, closes the deal, signs the deed, puts it in a safe deposit box — which because of what the Babylonians are about to do is actually a pottery jar, seals it, and records it . . . and announces,

> "thus says the Lord concerning this city - 'I am going to gather them from all the lands to which I drove them. I will bring them back and settle them in safety. They shall be my people and I will be their God . . . I will make an everlasting covenant with them.'" [Jeremiah 32:36-41]

All of which sounds very much like words old John of Patmos wrote to the early Christian churches as the full fury of Roman persecution was about to fall on their heads.

> "See, the home of God is among mortals.
> He will dwell with them as their God;
> they will be his peoples . . .
> the first things have passed away. . . .
> See, I am making all things new."
> [Revelation 21:3, 5]

So, as we look backward at you, Mr. Jones, and beyond — to the people of God in the early Christian Church, all the way back to Jeremiah, we notice that they are all looking ahead — at us! It's amazing. When u look back, just a little while, to Elam Davies and William Blair and Virginia Wirtz, on back to Harrison Ray nderson and John Timothy Stone, or to our saints, to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., or all the way back to John Calvin, everybody is looking forward, to the future, in hope and confidence and joy. So as we look backward at you today, Mr. Jones, we can't help but look forward. Like Jeremiah and John of Patmos and like you, we believe God is out in the future calling us; that God really does love the world and is creating something new and has appointed us to demonstrate it, and advocate it, and celebrate it and shout and sing about it. We believe God is a power in the future — that when the future comes, God will be there. We believe, as you did, Mr. Jones, that part of our vocation is not simply enjoying the past and maintaining this church exactly as you gave it to us, but rebuilding it and making it strong for its future . . . which will extend far beyond our own.

Mr. Jones, you worried out loud 79 years ago about whether the expenditure would be justified and you said, wisely, that the answer would be in terms of service and the lives lived here and the spirit that shall go out of here and into the community . . . your hope, you said, was that these walls may have a silent ministration of their own. I'm intrigued by that — the silent ministration of these walls.

They do have, Mr. Jones. People sit in this space every day and look up and think about what you called the presence and power of the Unseen. The whole world walks by us, church people and people who never darken the door of a church or even for a moment think about it. Our world walks by us, Mr. Jones, and is reminded of that power and presence, and I think we are part of what grace there is in this neighborhood which is exactly what the church does in this secular, pluralistic culture. Just the day before yesterday, I stopped and atted with a man who is in the Garth every afternoon. He's had a serious stroke and everyday his helper and ractical nurse wheels him into the Garth and laboriously, with great difficulty and patience and heroic effort, e gets up and walks around and around the Garth's sidewalk, surrounded by the "silent ministrations of these walls."

It happens all the time . . . Tonight the elegant music of Palestrina will mingle with the sounds of the city . . . and tomorrow women with breast cancer meet upstairs and A.A. will meet downstairs and homeless people will come to the Social Service Center and worried and anxious people to the Counseling Center, and young people and older people struggling with values, and youngsters, 450 of them, come every week to be tutored and that's only a fraction of what you set in motion.

It goes on here and all over this city and nation and all over the world. Yes, it is very much worth it when people give their time and hope and resources because they believe in the future and love God.

So yes, Mr. Jones, the expenditure was worth it, because the life of Jesus Christ is lived out here and in the lives of his people who worship and pray and serve and laugh together here and then spread throughout the city. And yes, Mr. Jones, these walls have a silent ministration of their own. And yes, we too, 79 years later, are grateful for what you gave us, and grateful for the privilege of receiving the old and restoring and rebuilding and recreating this church of Jesus Christ for the new world — to which he calls us.

Blessed be his name — which is the same yesterday, today, tomorrow — Jesus Christ our Lord, forever. Amen.